Stefan

Wul

Oms en série

folio SF

STEFAN WUL

Oms in series

roman

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PART ONE

1.

Silently, the dragon approached the porthole overlooking the nature room. Smiling, he watched his daughter play.

She was a pretty little draag girl, with big red eyes, a narrow nasal slit, a mobile mouth and, on each side of her smooth skull, two eardrums translucent by dint of delicacy.

She ran across the grass, somersaulted, and rolled down to the pool, shouting with joy. Then she went underwater as far as she could and gathered enough momentum to rocket up to the diving board, where she hung on with her fingertips.

As she repeated her maneuver for the third time, she missed the diving board and had to unfold the membrane of her arms to glide to the grass.

She stood there for a moment, dreaming of some new game. Petite for her seven years, she was only three meters tall. Her father entered the nature room and walked towards her. He took her hand, still smiling. She looked up at him. "I promised you a surprise," said the dragon.

She remained motionless for a moment, then, her red eyes lighting up with joy, she squeezed her father's hand with her twenty little fingers and cried out:

— The neighbor's man had his baby!

"She had two," said the dragon. "That's quite rare. We'll choose the most beautiful one for you. Or rather, no, you'll choose it yourself." She tugged at her father's arm, stamping her feet.

— Quickly, Father, take me to see them!

— Get dressed first, said the draag, pointing to the tunic abandoned on the grass.

In haste, she put on the thin garment and ran ahead of her father to get there faster. One after the other, they crossed the embankment separating them from the neighboring house.

"Quickly, father," said the child, raising himself on his legs to try to touch the introducer, a simple shiny plate fixed to the door.

— You are too small, don’t get upset, said the draag, touching the introducer with his hand.

The neighbor's face appeared on the plaque and said:

— There you are, Praw, I see you've brought Tiwa to me.

— And in what a state of impatience! Praw smiled from his wide mouth.

The door opened before the visitors. The neighbor was waiting for them, standing at the entrance to the nature room. He politely unfolded his membranes, extending his arms.

— Happiness upon you, Praw.

— Happiness upon you, Faoz, replied Tiwa's father.

Already, slipping under the neighbor's legs, the little girl was running across the grass. Her father called her back, half-indulgent, half-stern. "Tiwa! You didn't say hello."

Tiwa quickly unfolded a membrane.

"Happiness…," she said. "Oh! Neighbor Faoz, where are they? Where are the little ones?"

With his big red eye, Faoz gave Praw a knowing look. —

This way, he said, crossing the room.

They passed through several doors and entered a small hermitage where a slight animal smell lingered, despite the immaculate cleanliness of the place.

Lying on a cushion, a mother was breastfeeding her two little

ones. She held them close to her in her folded arms, while they greedily suckled at her two breasts.

Tiwa leaned forward to get a closer look.

"Oh!" she said, "they hardly have any hair on their heads!" "When it's a baby, we say 'hair' and not 'plumes'," Praw clarified. "They've just been born; their hair will grow later."

She looked at the mother's long blond hair.

“Will they have golden hair, like their mother?” “Certainly,” said Faoz, “their father was also of golden descent.” “Are they purebred?” exclaimed Praw. “You know, Tiwa, this is a wonderful gift you’re getting from your neighbor Faoz!”

— No, I'm happy for Tiwa! Which one do you choose, Tiwa?

The little girl holds out her hand.

— Can I touch them?

"Be careful, the mother might bite. Let me show them to you." Faoz unfolded his membrane and stroked the ome's blond hair. The ome growled a little, deep in her throat.

"Come now," her master calmed her. "Be good, Doucette. I don't want to hurt them. I'll give them back to you right away... Do you understand?"

He took the two twins and said:

“She’s intelligent and affectionate, but having babies always makes them a little grumpy. It’s instinct!” He placed a baby in Tiwa’s outstretched hand. The baby wriggled like a little frog, waving two tiny closed fists. A drop of milk trickled from its crying, toothless mouth.

"How cute he is!" Tiwa admired.

Pleading, the girl clung sometimes to her master's legs, sometimes to Tiwa's, saying incessantly: "Baby! Baby!". The draag stroked her head with his free hand.

— Yes, my dear Doucette, we will give them back to you, yes, be good!

"They're exactly the same," said Tiwa, cradling the baby in the palm of her hand. "I'll take this one. Can I take it right away?" Her father protested.

— No, he is still too young, you will take him in a few days, when he can walk.

The little draag looked disappointed. Her red eyes dulled. "But you can come and see him before then," said the neighbor, taking the baby away from her.

“Yes,” said the father, “a few days go by quickly. And besides, you have to give me time to have a nursery set up at home.” Tiwa pointed to the cushion on which the mother ome turned her cubs

this way and that to see if they had been hurt by the draags. “Will there be a cushion like that in the nursery?”

- Of course.

— And a feeding trough like that?

— But yes!

She jumped up and down, snapping her armpits. She hummed:

— A little om! A little om!

Then, suddenly more serious:

— That's my favorite beast!

Les deux draags sourirent.

— And why?

— Because they can talk, they can even swim when they are taught.

— Yes, but quite badly… Well! We'll leave our neighbor alone.

He turned towards Faoz, unfolding his membranes.

— Thank you, Faoz. Happiness to you!

"Happiness," said Faoz, as he walked them out. "Don't thank me, it's nothing."

He stroked Tiwa's smooth head.

— Happiness, little one. And see you soon!

— Happiness upon you, neighbor Faoz.

She skipped joyfully across the median strip, following her father. She was happy; in a few days, the little ones would be able to walk, and she would be able to take her own.

It is true that a single day on the large planet Ygam was equivalent to forty-five days on a small planet called Earth, a very distant world from which the Oms originated.

2.

When the little om chosen by Tiwa was old enough to walk on its own, it was separated from its mother. The neighbor Faoz insisted that this separation be gradual, because he was kind and loved animals.

He began by entrusting the little one to Tiwa for just one hour a day, then two, and so on… In this way, the mother and child gradually grew less accustomed to each other. At first, the mother moaned endlessly each time her son left for the neighboring house. Then she increasingly transferred her affection to her other child.

When the little boy was finally settled in the nursery prepared for him, the mother suffered only from a vague regret without a specific

reason. But for several days afterward, she would whimper at times, without really knowing why.

When Tiwa learned that they would no longer take away her little om, she said:

— This time, he's really mine! What am I going to call him? — Mother's name is Doucette, advised his father, call him Doucet.

Tiwa watched the young animal tearing up handfuls of grass from the nature room.

He squatted down on his chubby little legs, clenched his fists in the grass with a beatific look on his face, and threw green tufts into the pool water while laughing joyfully.

"Doucet wouldn't suit him," said the child draag. "Look how vigorous he is!"

"We have to stop him," said Praw. "That little demon is going to wreak havoc in the nature room."

He raised his arms, unfurled his membranes, and sent wind towards the little om, saying:

— Hey! Will you please stop, little demon!

"No, Father," said Tiwa, "you'll frighten him. He doesn't know what he's doing, he's just a little creature!"

But the animal didn't seem frightened at all. Imitating the draag, it waved its little arms and cried out in turn:

— Hou! Little demon, hou!

The father and daughter burst out laughing. Nevertheless, the draag took two large steps towards the om and grabbed him by the leg. He twirled him around in his hand and carried him off into the omery despite Tiwa's protests.

"He needs to get some sleep," he said, closing the door of the hut. "He's been up to enough mischief lately, he needs to rest."

He added, to deflect his little girl's displeasure: "So, what name are you going to give him? He already has beautiful hair, like his mother. Call him Doré."

The little girl pouted, while her father gently pushed her towards the nature room.

— There are too many guys named Doré because they have hair like that, she said.

At that moment, two small fists were heard in the distance striking the door of the orchard while a high-pitched voice shouted:

— Hey, you little demon!

The two dragons laughed again.

"He's terrible!" exclaimed the father.

The little girl suddenly stopped laughing.

— Father, she said, I will call him Terrible.

Praw s’étonna :

— That's not an om name!

— It doesn't matter, Father, I think it suits him well. To make it quicker, I'll just call him Terr!

Praw sourit.

— Do as you wish, Tiwa, this om is yours.

— I will write his name on his collar, I… Oh! Father, he doesn’t have a collar yet!

— We'll buy him one.

Tiwa trépigna.

— Right away, Father, right away. Take me to buy a collar for Terr!

A green-eyed draag entered the nature room. Praw turned towards her.

— You hear, Wami, the little girl wants me to buy a necklace for the om.

Tiwa pleaded with the draag in turn.

— Mother, would you mind? Would you mind if I went out with Father to buy a necklace for Terr?

"Terr?" said Tiwa's mother. "Who is Terr?"

— That’s the name I gave to my little om.

The draag snapped its membranes sharply.

"All I ever hear about is that man!" she said. "Since he's been here, everything's gone wrong. I bet you haven't done any studying today?"

Tiwa cast a furtive, unhappy glance at the instruction headphones hanging on the wall.

"No, Mother," she said in a tiny voice, blinking her red eyes.

The draag approached her and wrapped her shoulders in its membrane. She said in a softer tone:

— That's fine, Tiwa, I'll excuse you from instruction again this morning.

She turned to Praw.

— Take her to buy that necklace, Praw, if it pleases her so much.
— That was my intention, said the father, but she must promise to start studying as soon as we return.

Tiwa promised everything that was asked and led her father towards the exit door.

They crossed the embankment diagonally and, to go faster, unfolded their membranes to glide down to the ground. From his terrace, the neighbor Faoz watched them take off.

"How's the little om doing?" he asked.

"Very well," replied Tiwa, "we will buy her a necklace."

The father and daughter climbed into the sphere and closed the lid. Soon, the sphere left the ground and sped towards the city, whose blocks could be seen on the horizon.

"Where are we going to find this necklace, Father?" asked Tiwa. "In Block 12A, there's a large display room. You can find everything you need for the oms there. That's where I got the equipment for our personal omery."

In a few minutes they were at the city gates and left the sphere to take the mobile path leading to blocks A. Through tunnels or bridges, they successively crossed the blocks of the other districts and arrived at the center of the city, where the crowd was much larger and where the spheres of the supervisors and technicians looked like large soap bubbles suspended in the air.

They left path 3 and let themselves be carried along path A to block 12. Arriving in the hall of block 12, they went up ten floors and Tiwa was amazed.

A long corridor was lined on one side with glass cases where you could see Oms of all races. Some were blond like Terr. Others had dark skin and curly hair. Some males had a mane that started between their eye and ear and, framing their mouth, ended at their chin.

Further on, there were rows of glass cages where you could see dogs, Martian lions, birds from Ygam, and all sorts of other animals from the universe. But Tiwa only had eyes for the oms, that race of small monkeys from Earth.

Tiwa's exclusive interest in these animals was nothing particularly unusual for a draag. The om was by far the most prized companion on Ygam. Didn't a proverb say, "The om is the draag's best friend"? Moreover, it was in front of the om cages that the largest crowds gathered.

Praw let his daughter distract herself for a while by looking at the shop windows, then he led her away, saying:

— Time flies, little one. Don't forget that you must learn when you get home. Come and choose a necklace for your little one.

They entered a room where all sorts of things for animals were sold. A salesman immediately approached them to show them different models of collars. Tiwa chose a large blue one.

However, she expressed concern about its size, saying:

— That will never suit my little om.

But the salesman reassured her by showing her a button that she could press more or less to make the collar smaller or larger. He also offered her a magnetic leash, a simple bracelet that she just had to

put on her wrist to prevent the dog from straying more than six millimeters away, the bracelet and collar being set to work together.

Praw made a package and came out of the block accompanied by a very happy Tiwa.

After half an hour, they were back home. Tiwa hurried to the orphanage, put the collar around Terr's neck and the bracelet on her own wrist. Then, keeping her promise, she went and sat on the grass in the nature room and put her instruction headphones to his ears while the little orphan, soothed by her caresses, fell asleep on her lap.

"...elementary cycle," the listeners murmured softly, "tenth lesson. This lesson will be devoted to Ygamography. Please close your eyes."

Tiwa closed her eyes and a clear mental image formed under her skull. A sphere was slowly rotating, a sphere divided into irregular red and green spots.

"Our last lesson dealt with the genesis of the seas and continents of Ygam. Here now is their distribution as the draags deliberately rearranged them on the surface of Ygam. There are six continents of Ygam: four artificial and two natural. The latter were not altered by the draags. They retained the shape that chance had given them and serve as a reserve for lesser species."

"The four continents reworked by the draags are of equilateral triangular shape and equal dimensions. Two are placed at equal distances from each other in hemisphere A, the other two are placed at equal distances from each other in hemisphere B.
Their tips are directed towards the poles, their bases face the equator.

"The natural continents are located at the equator, but as far away as possible from the rectified continents, that is to say..." The little boy, in a pleasant dream, saw a multicolored sphere spinning. He heard words he didn't understand and couldn't even have pronounced correctly.

With the draag's hand resting on her head, the bracelet was positioned very close to the necklace. Through a very simple phenomenon, but one that no one had ever considered, Terr could hear and see, in her sleep, everything that her young mistress perceived through her headphones.

The words and images fell into his subconscious like seeds into virgin soil.

3.

Terr made a habit of always sleeping on Tiwa's lap when she was studying.

At first, the Draag parents prevented her from doing so, fearing that their daughter would be distracted by the presence of the small animal. But they soon realized that they had misjudged things.

Indeed, when Tiwa was deprived of the presence of the little om, she shortened her lessons to go play with him sooner. Conversely, the company of her younger classmate encouraged her to stay with her headphones on longer. Praw and Wami even ended up, after realizing this, advising the child to take the little om with her to ease the daily chore of lessons.

One day, when Terr was a little older, Praw heard a noise coming from the hut where he had locked him up for a few hours. He went over, listened closely, and heard the animal humming. A strange song with even stranger lyrics:

"The city of Klud is the largest city on the southern continent of A, the city of Torm is the largest on the northern continent of A, north, north... The original element of the draags is water; in the past, the draags could not breathe air... air... air! Today, they are amphibious thanks to mutations obtained by the scientist Zarek, Zarek, rek, rek!..."

Praw couldn't believe his ears. He went to find Wami, his wife.

"Wami," he told her, "something extraordinary is happening!" "And what is it?"

— Little Om knows... it's incredible... little Om knows Tiwa's lessons by heart!

Wami shrugged.

— You always exaggerate. Tiwa may have taught him a few words, but that's...

Praw did not answer and led his wife towards the orchard. Behind the closed door, a youthful voice hummed: "...that is why, that is why... glanel spores do not germinate in acidic, acidic soil... Tiwa, Tiwa, wicked... wool, will you learn... The atmosphere... the atmosphere of the planet Sird is composed of one third strong, strong, strong elements... and two thirds weak elements!"

Praw suddenly opened the door and found Terr sitting on his cushion and rocking back and forth to the rhythm of his nonsensical song.

Terr had grown into a handsome little boy with curly hair down to

his shoulders. He jumped up and ran to Praw's legs, asking him:

- Sugar !

Losing all dignity, Wami began to sing herself to lure the animal:

— Tiwa, you little wicked thing… wool, do you want to learn!

But Terr burst out laughing and squirmed to escape Praw's hand. His eyes peered at the green space of the nature room where Tiwa was frolicking. The draag released him and let him run towards the pool where he dove in, giggling with joy.

Perplexed, the Draag couple looked at each other.

"After all," said Wami, "we have one om who speaks better than the others, there's no need to make a big deal out of it. He doesn't understand a word he's saying."

"Obviously," said Praw. "He mixes everything up, botany and cosmography, ygamography and biology..."

They in turn entered the nature room and spoke to Tiwa who was coming out of the water.

— Do you know that your little one can talk?

"Of course," said Tiwa. "I'm trying to teach him to speak like a draag, but it's difficult. There are some words he can't pronounce."

"Really?" said Wami. "Your father and I just heard him reciting your lessons by heart."

Surprised, the child shook her membranes to dry them a little. She said:

— That's not possible, Terr speaks just like a draag baby and... I never taught him my lessons, he couldn't have... — We heard him! affirmed the father.

The little girl shook her head.

"Well," she said, "I don't know... Maybe... Maybe I recited them without paying attention..."

Praw turned to his wife:

— I thought that the Oms couldn't pronounce certain words because of a special shape of their mouth, but that's not it!

— What do you mean?

Praw sourit.

"Imagine," he said, "a particularly stupid draag on a foreign planet. He might manage to learn a good hundred useful words in the aliens' language: sugar, exit, hunger, thirst. But he would be incapable of forming sentences."

— So what?

— But, listen to me, he could perfectly well “recite” phrases he has heard, by heart, without understanding their meaning. That is exactly the case with little Terr.

Wami shrugged again.

— That's a lot of talk for such a trivial matter! This man is very attached to Tiwa; he follows her everywhere. He must have heard her reciting her lessons and learned them mechanically without even realizing it. The incident is closed; let's not discuss it further.

She turned towards Tiwa.

— That reminds me of something; you haven't learned anything yet today. Hurry up and put your headphones on.

Tiwa obediently went to take off her headphones. But she stopped short. The hook on the wall was still there, but the headphones had disappeared.

Praw noticed his daughter's discomfort.

"Where have you left them lying around again?" he said, snapping his membranes.

— I don't know, Father.

— Look carefully. You usually sit under the flippers, by the pool.

They searched the grass but found nothing. Tiwa even dove to explore the bottom of the pool. They scrutinized every nook and cranny of the nature room in vain.

“I bet you let Terr play with it,” Praw growled. “These devices are very expensive, you’re not being reasonable, Tiwa.” Tiwa’s red eyes clouded with annoyance. “I assure you, Father…”

"I'm not strict enough with you," the dragon interrupted. "But, father, I never let the om play with the headphones, that's the truth!"

The father remained thoughtful.

"That would explain a lot of things," he said... "Where is Terr?"

— Terr! called the little girl.

The little boy did not respond to this call.

"He's hiding, that little rascal," said Praw. "Terr, will you come! Terr, a sugar cube!"

— Terr, come get a sugar cube!

Mother Draag returned to the room.

"What's going on?" she said. "You're making a racket. This isn't the time to play with this 'om' anymore. I told you to educate yourself, Tiwa!"

"She can't," Praw moaned, "the headphones are gone! Terr's gone too!"

"No," said Wami, "I just saw him in the corridor." "Terr!"

All three of them rushed into the corridor.

— Where was he?

— There, on that seat.

— Bon sang, Jura Praw.

He pointed a finger towards the seat.

— Why are you gesturing like that?

— The headphones! said Praw.

- Well ?

"The guy could easily reach the headphones by climbing onto that seat. I bet he's playing with them right now. If he breaks them…!" He went towards the room, whose door had been left wide open. The small room was empty.

— Where has that little devil gone?

Tiwa burst into tears at the thought of having lost her om. "Instead of crying," said her mother, "you'd better put on your bracelet; it's the only way to find it. You haven't lost it, have you?"

"I... I left it in my tunic pocket," Tiwa gasped. "Well, hurry up!"

The little dragon ran to the nature room, searched her tunic and put on her bracelet. She pressed a button. She raised a sad head.

— Well? repeated Father Draag.

"He must be far away already," whined Tiwa, "the bracelet is pulling me a little here, but not much."

She pointed towards the entrance of the house. The door was ajar. "He's out!" said Praw. "I knew it." "Pull on the leash, Tiwa." "Oh no," said Tiwa, "if I pull too hard, he'll bump into something. He could hurt himself badly."

Annoyed, Father Draag took the bracelet from him and pressed the button as hard as he could to pull Terr's necklace towards him as hard as possible.

4.

Terr was running. He had already crossed about ten medians and had hurtled down a ramp at full speed when he suddenly felt his collar squeezing him. He dropped the headphones and put his hands to his neck.

Pulled by an invisible force, he took three steps backward and turned around so that the pull fell on his neck, not his throat. He took a few more steps against his will and clung with all his might to a metal bar protruding from the parapet.

At that moment, he felt a hard hand on his shoulder. He almost screamed in rage and turned his face, flushed from exertion, towards the intruder. A tall, black-bearded man was behind him and saying: "What an idiot you are!"

"Help me," Terr. gasped.

With a sneer, the stranger pressed the button on the necklace. It

widened enough to allow the little boy's head to pass through. The bearded boy sneered again, brandished the necklace, which seemed about to fly away, and released it suddenly. The object flew through the air, bounced off a raised area, and disappeared from their sight.

"They should take it right in the nostril!" exclaimed the bearded man. "That would slow them down a bit!"

He pushed Terr by the shoulders.

— Let's get out of here quickly!

The little boy first followed his new ally who was running away at full speed, then he stopped abruptly and retraced his steps.

"You're crazy!" yelled his savior.

Without replying, Terr picked up the headphones he was about to forget, placed them on his shoulder and, bent under their weight, caught up with his companion who had charitably slowed down.

— Throw that away, advised the tall man, without losing a stride. — No, I need it, panted Terr.

— That's what I was saying, you're crazy. Come on, give it to me.

He snatched the headphones from the little boy and hoisted them onto his own shoulders.

— I am stronger than you!

— Where are we going?

— Don't worry about it!

A distant voice cried out:

— Terr! Come get a sugar cube!

But Terr couldn't hear. His ears were ringing. He staggered and collapsed unconscious, exhausted by an effort to which his life as a pampered pet had not accustomed him.

His companion stopped, seemed to search, spotted a shady spot under a concrete landing and hid the headphones there. Then, bending down, he picked up the lifeless boy and cautiously veered out of the small settlement.

He slipped into a ditch surrounded by tall grass and, walking under cover for a good half hour, reached a vacant lot where a large quantity of unusable spheres were rusting and falling apart.

He set Terr down on the ground and slapped him hard. At the third slap, the young boy gasped and regained consciousness. He opened his mouth and breathed heavily.

"Are you feeling better?" inquired the bearded man.

— Yes… Happiness to you…

— My name is Brave.

— Happiness upon you, Brave… I, but who are you?

— A man!

— I mean… you know how to speak!

— You too, little one.

— I thought I was an exception. I thought I was the only one who knew how to speak.

Brave combed his beard with his fingers.

— You're not the only one, but it's rare. And generally, a man who knows how to speak cannot tolerate servitude.

Terr was surprised:

— There are some words you say… I don't understand them. What does servitude mean?

— I'll explain. Do your teachers know you can talk? — No… that is to say, they were beginning to suspect. I learned that way, by listening to them. And then I listened to Tiwa's lessons.

— Who is Tiwa?

—My little mistress. So, I knew how to talk, but they kept talking to me like I was… like I was a dog. Have you ever seen dogs? It's funny, isn't it? They're even smaller than a… They're sweet!… What was I saying?… Yes, so I didn't dare speak except to say: sugar – happy me – hungry… And then today, they heard me talking normally. And they gave me terrible looks, and they didn't seem happy. It scared me a little, not too much!…

— So what?

— So I thought to myself: I won’t show them that I can talk anymore, they might whip me like when I stole sugar from the kitchen.

— And you left?

— No, not right now… I need to explain to you that there’s a wonderful thing, something I love above all else: instructional headphones. They show pictures, they say things. And when you know those things, you feel… how can I put it… stronger. Yes, that’s it, stronger!

— So, you stole them!

- What ?

— The headphones!

— Ah! yes, I had the impression that they no longer wanted me to continue listening to them when Tiwa was learning, so for me, it was terrible… Yes, I stole from them.

He stood up suddenly, his face bright red.

— Where are they? Did you lose them?

"I hid them," said Brave. "We'll find them."

Terr looked very annoyed.

— Are you sure?

— Yes, to make you happy. Because, for me, headphones are just a bunch of crap, I think they're useless. But I'll go get them for you.

Don't worry!

Brave combed his beard again and continued:

— So, you left without knowing where you were going, how you were going to live, eat, drink?

Terr looked sheepish.

— I didn't think of all that!

— Yeah. Well! I'll tell you what. You were lucky to run into me.

— What are you saying?

Brave the monkey, adopting a small voice:

— What are you saying, what are you saying? Go on, you fancy-looking fellow! You have everything to learn; things that headphones don't tell you! Terr scratched his ear:

— Sometimes, I don't understand you.

— I know, I know. Okay, now you're coming with me. Without me, you're finished. And you're going to obey me. I'm the leader of the gang. — The gang?

— Yeah, the Big Tree gang.

— Oh !

— What, oh?

— What bothers me deep down is that… I'm afraid Tiwa is unhappy about having lost me.

Brave clapped his hands impatiently.

"Little guy, you're talking nonsense. When you've spent some time with us, you'll change your feelings for your Tiwa, believe me. Come on, you're not tired anymore. Let's go, we have a long walk ahead of us. Night is falling."

5.

They walked for a very long time through the night. So long, in fact, that when Terr awoke, he couldn't remember when he had fallen asleep. He found himself lying in a kind of nest held together by wooden supports between the forks of a tree. All around him, branches rustled gently in the breeze, letting through shimmering patches of light from the starry sky. Accustomed to cushions, his delicate skin was irritated by the thousand prickles of the dry grass that made up his bed. He propped himself up on one elbow, furiously scratching his legs with his free arm, and called softly:

— Brave !

Something moved beneath him; he lowered his eyes, already accustomed to the darkness, and saw an om he did not recognize.

An old om with a white beard and hair.

"Brave isn't here," said the old man, "he's gone back to the draags. You made him waste time, kid. But he was very happy to have saved you."

— Who are you, old man? asked Terr.

The old man gestured for him to come down. Terr, trembling with vertigo, used the cracks and knots in the wood to slide down to the old man. He found himself beside him in a slightly more spacious nest.

"Who are you?" he repeated.

— My master called me Faithful. And truly, I deserved my name. My master was a good draag and it was impossible not to love him. But one day, he left on a long journey and entrusted me to neighbors who beat me and didn't feed me.
So, I took the first opportunity to run away. That was a long time ago. And you, little one, what's your name? — My name is Terr.

— That doesn't mean anything…

— That's easier said than done.

The old man gave a thin smile:

— Terrible! Do you see that!

He touched the young boy's arms and added:

— You're not too badly built, but you need to build some muscle. How old are you?

— Tiwa, my mistress, says I am one hundred days old… Why do you wear a collar, Fidèle? Aren’t you a wild om?

— All the Oms, even the savages, wear a collar. Didn't you notice Brave's?

“No. He has too much beard and hair. I didn’t notice.” “They’re fake collars,” said Fidèle. “If someone were found without a collar, they’d take him back. I myself, when I was younger, was once caught by a guard. When he saw my collar, he said, ‘This man must belong to someone from the neighborhood.’ And he let me go. We’ll give you a fake collar.”

Terr remained thoughtful for a moment.

"I'm very hungry," he said, after a moment of silence. "Don't you have any food you could give me?"

The old man raised a finger in the air.

— Above your nest, you will find a cup of sap. — Sap?

— Yes, Brave has tapped the tree. The sap is flowing into a cup just for you. You'll see, it's like sugar. You won't be hungry or thirsty anymore.

The little om shuddered at the thought of engaging in dangerous acrobatics again. But, driven by hunger, he climbed the branches and

found the cup placed above his nest.

He drank a thick, lukewarm liquid with a very faint sweet taste. He didn't like this coarse food, but he drank enough to feel less weak and went back downstairs to keep old Fidèle company. "Feeling better, little one?" asked the old man.

— Yes, but I don't really like it.

— You'll get used to it. And besides, we have something

else. — Where are the other wild oms?

"That's right, they're all out hunting to bring back anything that might be useful to us. They usually steal it from the draags." An idea popped into Terr's head.

— Are they stealing instructional headphones?

The old man sneered:

— No. What for?

Terr evades the question.

— I stole some.

— Oh?

— Yes. I enjoy learning. It makes me stronger. —

And are you educated?

“A little, I can read. I also understand a lot because I listened to Tiwa during her study time.” “Believe me, kid, the draags’ education might be fun, but it’s of no use to the oms. What would be very useful to you, on the other hand, is knowing how to run fast, climb trees, fly without getting caught…”

Voices and rustling leaves could be heard at the foot of the tree. Soon, several figures were seen climbing the branches below. Until, at that moment, Brave's face appeared at the level of the nest.

— Well, said the latter, the luxury om is awake.

He showed the earphones perched on his shoulder and added:

— Look what I've brought you, luxury om.

“Oh!” said Terr happily, “Happiness be upon you, Brave!” Other oms appeared; one of them, black and curly-haired, often laughed, showing his white teeth, and answered to the name of Charbon. A few females were part of the group, as well as some children almost as young as Terr. They were all muscular from their hard lives and playfully carried heavy tin cans, giant fruits, rolls of wire, and various objects taken from the draags.

They gathered around Terr with benevolent curiosity.

"How old are you?" a young boy asked him.

"One hundred days," replied Terr, looking quite intimidated.

"One hundred? What does that mean? I've got two ten hands of hands, plus two," replied the young boy, proudly tossing his long hair back. "Show me how tough you are."

Putting his words into action, he shoved Terr and nearly knocked him out of the nest. Brave intervened and slapped the aggressor across the face.

— Calm down, Vaillant, Terr is not yet used to the life we lead.

— Did you watch the baby, Fidèle? inquired a woman with sculpted features.

— Yes, little girl, your baby doesn’t need anything.

— I'm going up to see, said the man, jumping from branch to branch towards the top of the tree.

She ran into Brave, who had gone up to put the headphones in Terr's nest. Brave dropped down onto a nearby branch. He raised his arm and said:

— Listen, all of you. I want everyone to be very kind to Terr. For a while, he'll just stay in the tree and put away everything we bring back, with Fidèle's help. This pampered fellow needs to get used to the effort and build up some muscle. After that, I'll see to his education.

He turned to Terr:

"As for you, like I already told you, you'll obey me to the letter. I brought you your headphones as a treat, but you're only allowed to play with them after you've done your work. Understood?" "Yes," said Terr in a tiny voice.

He felt utterly sad, longing for Tiwa and the nature room. He was a little cold, weighed down by the sap to which he wasn't accustomed. In short, more miserable than ever, he wished he were locked away in a comfortable hermitage, far from all these well-meaning brutes.

"Come with me," said Brave.

Docile, Terr followed him, climbed branches, passed through difficult places by pulling on supple twigs as if on ropes and
He reached an enormous branch. He saw Brave disappear into a hole in this branch and followed him into a kind of cavern roughly hewn from the wood.

— I can't see anything, it's dark, said Terr.

— Wait a bit, said Brave's voice.

Terr heard a groan of effort and the cavern lit up all at once. Brave proudly pointed to an enormous stone resting on a metal rod.

— But it's... ventured Terr.

"Yes," said Brave, "it's a draag lamp; the others aren't strong enough. You see, I put this big stone on the button. To turn it off, I remove the stone."

Terr glanced around. He was in a vast junk shop. Piles of boxes of all sizes were lined up haphazardly on the floor.

"There you go," said Brave. "You're going to put all this away. You'll put the boxes with the boxes, the spools of thread with the spools of thread. You'll do the same for the rest."

— But, said Terr, pointing to a pile of boxes, do I have to put away the ones that are already stacked?

Brave looked at him as if he were dealing with a complete idiot. — Can't you see they're already put away?

"Oh no," said Terr; "you've put boxes of food with boxes of medicine. There's even a box of powder for treating draag membranes."

Brave remained silent for a moment.

"All these boxes are the same shape," he said finally. "How do you guess what's inside?"

"It's written right there... These little symbols are for reading." Brave combed his beard with a familiar gesture. He murmured:

"So, reading means guessing what's in the boxes based on the symbols there? I never really understood what 'reading' meant... Well, if that's how it is, do it your way. It'll save us hours of effort opening boxes that serve no purpose."

— Good!

Before going out, Brave hesitated:

— Tell me, little one… Is it with instructional headphones that we learn to read?

- Of course.

Brave left, scratching his head.

6.

After a few days, Terr was perfectly adept at all the gymnastics required by his new arboreal life. He had grown a little, and his muscles were more defined beneath his tanned skin. More and more often, Brave took him running in the surrounding gardens, teaching him how to hide, how to crawl unseen by the draags, and how to steal fruits and vegetables bigger than himself.

One day, he gave her a necklace intended to disguise her irregular status and took her to the city.

“Don’t forget,” he told him, “that you should never let a draag know you can speak. This will allow you, among other things, to play the fool if they ask you questions about your masters or why you’re here or there. As for the rest, I’ve taught you enough tricks to be able to manage on your own.”

They walked one behind the other in a grassy ditch. —

What exactly are we going to do? asked Terr.

Brave gave a small laugh of anticipated pleasure.

"I brought you because you can read," he said. "We're going to steal. You'll read what's in the boxes, so I won't waste my time stealing useless things. Do you know how to swim?"

— Yes, why?

— You'll see. Now, be quiet. We'll continue in silence.

They entered a pipe that disappeared into the depths of a concrete wall. Terr walked comfortably, but in front of him, Brave's large figure was bent double.

They branched off several times in the increasingly thick shadows. Afraid of getting lost in this labyrinth, Terr stayed close to his guide. After a while, the guide stopped and whispered in his ear:

— Now, it's going to be uphill. You'll climb easily by using your back and knees. Give me a little head start so you don't get in my way.

Sweating and panting, they slowly climbed into a vertically rising tube. Soon, a glimmer of daylight appeared above them. It came from a small grate blocking the entrance to the shaft.

With his knees and back firmly braced against the walls, Brave gently lifted the grate and poked his head out. Reassured by his observation, he emerged from the pipe and offered Terr a hand to help him out.

They found themselves in an immense room where metal scaffolding supported machines that hummed quietly, unattended. Giant wheels, cams and gears danced a complicated ballet in every corner of the room.

Terr's attention was drawn to lines of cylindrical boxes moving jerkily along parallel tracks. These tracks disappeared into a dark tunnel which Brave pointed out.

“We have to go this way,” he said, pulling his young companion along. They climbed the metal railings and each hoisted themselves onto a box. Shaken with every pulse of the line, Terr clung on as if to the roof of a moving train, while Brave jumped ahead, leaping from box to box to go faster. Out of pride, Terr stood up and followed him as quickly as he could, guided in the shadows by faint silver reflections on the lids where he placed his feet.

They reached a second room where other machines seized the boxes one after the other, rolled them, stamped them with various draags characters and released them into a second tunnel.

Imitating his guide, Terr jumped to the ground before being sucked into the machines and ran to the second tunnel.

The third room was much larger than the others. The noise there

was bearable. Guided by mobile slides shifting one notch per second, the boxes were stacked along the walls in colorful colonnades.

"There you go," said Brave. "You can read. You're going to tell me which boxes to take."

Terr read some inscriptions that didn't teach him much. He approached a pile of boxes and read:

MX RECONSTRUCTOR

Extract from the livers of young mammals
associated with microelements 1 and 2;
presented in the form of sugared almonds.

"That one is good," he affirmed.

"Good," said Brave. "We'll steal ten boxes." Terr looked apprehensively at the boxes, which were as big as he was.

"How can we take all this with us?" he said. "It's impossible."

"I'll explain. Come near this window." Terr approached obediently. Brave pointed out a strong current of dirty water spewed out by the factory below.

— We're going to drop the boxes into the water. They'll float and be carried far away by the current. I know where. All we'll have to do is go and get them with the other men.

“But then,” exclaimed Terr, “why only ten boxes?” “Because it would be obvious! They’d get suspicious and have the factory watched. We wouldn’t be able to come back without getting caught. Whereas with ten boxes now and then, they won’t notice a thing; you understand? Come on, lay them on the ground one by one and roll them over to me, it’s not difficult. I’ll lift them up and pass them over the window sill.”

Terr grabbed the first box with both arms and pulled with all his might, managing to tip it over and, with a push, sending it rolling near Brave. Brave ducked, clenched his fingers under the box, and... He climbed back up the wall with a groan of effort. He hoisted her onto the windowsill and sent her plummeting into the void.

Meanwhile, Terr was sending him a second box and was already turning around to grab another when he was frozen on the spot by the voice of a draag.

— I've caught you, you bunch of thugs!

"Jump!" exclaimed Brave, "jump out the window!"

Frozen in place, Terr watched the immense, angry draag bearing down on him. As the giant's hand dipped towards the ground, the little om leaped up and ran to the window. Brave grabbed him under the armpits and shoved him into the gutter that flowed half a

stadium below.

Terr dove into the dirty water, resurfaced, and, swept along at full speed, turned his head to see Brave fall in as well. He swam with all his might against the current, but was soon overtaken by his companion.

— I thought he was going to take you, said Terr.

"He grabbed me," Brave smiled into his damp beard, "he grabbed me by the hair, but I bit him and he let go."

7.

At the entrance to the park where the free men nested, a rectangle of light could be distinguished in the night.

Terr was intrigued. Brave tried to explain to him that this rectangle was a sign for the use of the draags, and that the affairs of the draags did not interest the oms, but the young boy let his companion go home alone and cautiously went to prowl around the normal entrance of the draags.

It didn't take him long to understand. The sign read:

"Park closed tomorrow — Desomation."

Terr ran breathlessly through the shadows of the park. When he reached the bottom of the tree, he had to stop for a moment to catch his breath before climbing.

Finally, he clenched his nails into the wrinkles of the bark and rose among the branches.

When he emerged at the camp, he found his companions laughing and feasting under the stars.

"Well, Terr," asked Brave, "has the price of admission gone up?"

They all burst out laughing. But Terr remained motionless, his arms hanging limply at his sides.

"The park will be closed tomorrow," he said simply.

"What horrible news!" squealed Vaillant amidst more laughter.

But Terr didn't move. He added:

— Closed for desomation.

The laughter died away. Three toddlers who were babbling in their nests were silenced.

"What are you saying?" Brave inquired, "disimon..."

"Desomation," repeated Terr. "That means they're going to try to remove all the oms from the park."

He placed his hand on the chief's hairy arm.

— Brave, you told me once that two other tribes of free Oms

lived in the park. We absolutely must warn them.

Brave stood up on his branch and spat into the air. “You’re crazy! What a perfect opportunity to get rid of them! The Red Bush gang has the best spot in the park. We’ll take their place once the alert is over. As for the others, they’re just disorganized vagrants, idiots. It’s because of them that the draags are going to… disomerize.”

"How do they do it?" asked Charbon, looking worried. "Do they set traps or something?"

- I don't know.

— Me neither, I've never seen that. I've never even heard of it: desomition. Are you sure that means… what you said?

"Absolutely sure," said Terr. "The best thing is to leave for…"

Brave patted him on the head.

— Shut up! I'm the one in charge here.

He looked at his band with a certain air of majesty and said, "There! We'll get some sleep first to gather our strength. The night has barely begun, and we have plenty of time. But to make sure we're not caught off guard, we'll post lookouts. I need one of them."

He raised his hand in the air, fingers spread.

— Who feels rested enough to stay up late?

Several men offered themselves, including Terr. Brave counted them by folding his five fingers one by one, and Terr was included in his selection. Brave made the others sit down again and said:

Charbon will keep watch on the path by the lake, a hand's length from the tree. Vaillant will settle down on the gravel by the stream. Terr, you'll stay at the fork of the Red Bush. You two, at opposite ends of the main path. As for me, I'll stay up in the tree without closing my eyes. Go on! You'll whistle if anything's wrong.
When it's time to leave, I'll whistle to call you back to the foot of the tree. Let the others sleep!

The watchmen descended along the trunk. Once on the ground, Terr left the others and headed towards the fork of the Red Bush, where the path split in two to lead on one side to the great entrance of the draags, on the other to the Bush by climbing mossy rocks.

He climbed onto a pile of two or three stones overlooking the fork and crouched in a crevice in the rock.

Listening intently to the slightest whisper of the breeze in the leaves, his eyes wide in the twilight of the night, he remained motionless for a long time. But he was young, and soon his faction irritated him.

He left his hiding place and climbed the Red Bush trail to widen his field of vision. He reached a small grassy terrace that made an ideal observation point. From there, his gaze extended more than

one hundred and fifty paces (Brave would have said three hands, two hands, if he had been able to count that far without getting confused).

After what seemed like a very long time, he grew even more impatient and turned his eyes towards the top of the rocky outcrop. His curiosity prompted him to climb higher under the pretext of seeing further.

He obeyed his impulse and climbed up among the vines. After a few efforts, he reached the top of the mound. And there, half-frightened, half-pleased, he could survey a part of the park forbidden to his gang: the territory of the Red Bush. Sharpening his eyes, he made it out, violet in the starlight, and bristling with spiky leaves. Then, forgetting his apprehension and driven by a feeling both vague and powerful, he rushed down the other side, ran a few steps across the meadow, and shouted:

— Oh! Red Bush gang! Watch out, oms! Tomorrow, the draags will de-somize the park.

He repeated his call, turned to flee, and fell flat on his face, his head filled with the painful echoes of a blow from a club. A tall, black man leaned over him, sneering, tossed him like a feather over his shoulder, and ran towards the Bush.

Other figures approached him. Questions were exchanged.

— What did he say?

— Is he one of Brave's gang?

— I didn't understand anything.

— What do we do with it?

— Tell the Old Woman!

Terr was vaguely aware of being passed from hand to hand. He came to a sudden stop on a haystack. A splash of water in the face brought him back to his senses.

He sat up, shaking his head, and found himself surrounded by unfamiliar faces. Before him, a hunched figure. An old Black woman, with thin limbs and white, frizzy hair, regarded him unkindly. A barrage of hoarse questions rained down:

— What were you doing on our territory?

— I… came to warn you.

- What ?

— On the desomization of tomorrow. The draags…

— Well, well! And who told you to come and warn us?

— Nobody. It was a personal idea.

— An idea, what?

— Personal. An idea of my own.

— You talk like a dragon, kid. Why do you talk like a dragon?

“I’ve already been told that. It’s because I spent my childhood among the Draags, and because I educated myself a bit.” “Yeah… Don’t laugh, you lot, let him explain a little. So, you came to warn us that… what?” “The Draags are going to de-Somize. They’re going to kill all the Oms in the park, or take them prisoner, I don’t know… It’s written on the sign at the park gate.”

A tall man with red hair interrupted him:

— Don't listen to him, Old Woman, it's a trick by Brave's gang to make us leave the Bush!

"Shut up, Redhead," said the old woman. "And you, little one, how do you know what's on the sign?"

— I read it. I learned to read among the draags, and it's useful in all sorts of ways.

The old woman scratched her hair with both hands, then, tired of looking for a louse, signaled to the black man who had knocked Terr unconscious. — Scratch me, son.

The black man vigorously scratched her head with his nails. "That's all right, that's all right," said the old woman.

"And now…"

She called her son over and whispered something in his ear.

The black figure moved away beneath a canopy of interwoven branches. “Now that you know,” Terr ventured, “I’d like to go back with Brave. I…”

— Shut up! said the man.

And when he persisted, the redhead slapped him so hard he rolled onto the haystack.

Furious, Terr slowly got up, his eyes blazing. And suddenly, without warning, he leaped at his opponent and delivered a headbutt to his stomach that doubled him over.

The others got involved. A flurry of blows cut short his victory; he felt his hand tighten around a throat, his teeth dig into an arm, and he lost consciousness again.

When he opened his eyes again, he felt bound. Metal ties were clamped around his ankles and wrists. In front of him, the old woman was doubled over with laughter.

— Well, really! Ah! Well, really, you've messed up three of them, little one! Hey, you others, ah, ah, the little one gave you trouble, didn't he? He's still young, of course, but in a few days, when he's grown up, he'll be a fine fellow!

She became hoarse with a painful cough, her throat hissing. She seemed to lose her breath and finally regained control of herself, panting and wiping her eyes.

— Yeah, she said several times, yeah, yeah.

Then, turning to his son:

— Give it to me.

The black man handed her a large square of variegated paper. She unfolded it in front of Terr and blinked one eye.

"Here's a label," she said. "If you can read, tell me if what was in the box is safe to eat."

Terr fell silent; he hadn't gotten over his beating. The old woman laughed again. "Look at him," she said, "no, just look at him! He's sulking, he's got a bad temper!"

Then suddenly more serious:

"Listen, kid. I like you. I like guys like you, tough and all. You're young, but you've got potential, for sure! So, here goes. I'd rather believe you, about the... description. But I want to be sure, you understand, sure you weren't just pulling my leg. If you only answer about that label, I'll let you go... Got it? So, tell me if it's good to eat, what the label says. Prove you can read."

"That's not for eating," Terr blurted out abruptly, "it's Irsaan paste, for coloring the clothes of the draags! Green paste!" The old woman cast delighted glances around her.

"Bravo," she said. "Untie him, you others."

Reluctantly, the oms obeyed and Terr found himself free in the blink of an eye.

"Don't leave just yet," said the old woman while the teenager massaged his wrists.

She approached him and spoke right in front of him:

— I'll let you go, kid, but if I realize I've been wrong, watch out. I'll always find you! On the other hand, if you haven't told us any jokes, you can always ask me for something if you need it.

"I told the truth," declared Terr.

— Good, little one, good. Now, go… Not that way, idiot! Guide him, Redhead.

Terr followed the red-haired man through a maze of covered walkways where a church light filtered through, and suddenly emerged into the meadow. They parted without a word.

Terr took about a hundred steps towards the rocky ground, then he ran off at full speed, reached the hill and climbed it in a few minutes.

Having reached the fork, he resumed his watch and wondered if his band had heard the noise caused by his expedition.

He soon realized that this was not the case. Two figures, whom he recognized as Charbon and Vaillant, appeared around the bend in the track. To guide them towards him, Terr gave a soft whistle.

"What are you doing?" asked Valiant. "Didn't you hear Brave's signal? Everyone's waiting for you at the foot of the tree." "But you've got a nosebleed?" worried Charbon. "What's going on?"

Terr lied.

"I knocked myself unconscious when I fell on the rocks," he said. "I just woke up."

8.

"There you are!" said Brave when he saw them arrive.

"He knocked himself out when he fell!" announced Vaillant.

“I was starting to worry. You haven’t broken anything?” Terr reassured him. Brave quickly inspected his small group, about thirty individuals. Most of the men were carrying babies. The males were laden with miscellaneous packages. Old Fidèle leaned on a stick, still panting from the descent.

Brave thought it over. His basic reasoning told him to split his band into several groups, more mobile and less noisy. But, fearing he might lose people along the way, he listened to his feelings. A false sense of security, an impression of strength and warmth, washed over him as he considered the tribe as a whole. He gave the signal to depart.

In single file, the oms followed the usual trail for their raiding expeditions. They wound between the palm trees, forded the stream and left the park without difficulty.

They then trudged single file through the mud of a ditch alongside the road. Sounds of falling and curses erupted here and there, while Brave shouted "Silence!" as quietly as possible. Terr and Vaillant supported old Fidèle.

"Where are we going?" Vaillant whispered.

— I have the impression that Brave wants to put us in this vacant lot, while we wait for something better. He didn't say anything?

— No. But I think you're right.

The old man was too out of breath to give his opinion. He stumbled miserably over the slightest bumps in the ground and his breathing sounded like a lament.

Suddenly, Brave ordered everyone to stop. Shouts ran through the column. Everyone froze. Terr and Vaillant helped Fidèle sit down in the mud.

“Silence!” Brave’s commanding voice boomed again. A footstep approached on the road. A slow, heavy step of draag. A draag on foot was a rare sight, but it did happen sometimes—otherwise, why

would roads have existed? The limp beats of their feet lashed the pavement in rhythm, like the blows of a wet rag. As the noise grew louder, a certain discrepancy in the rhythm of the steps became noticeable. “Two draags!” Terr murmured.

— What? said Vaillant.

Terr showed him two fingers… Already, the deep hum of a conversation could be heard. The draag mouths chopped up the words, in their staccato way, so difficult for an om throat to reproduce. The two giant figures could be distinguished, pacing heavily along the road. The luminescence of red eyes could be seen in the night. Sentences took shape:

— … a little tiring, but this exercise brings us closer to nature.

— Oh! You know, our nature would be to swim. I've always wondered if old Zarek was right to make us mutate.

— Don't talk nonsense, we had reached a certain level of evolution in the water…

- Hold off !

- What ?

— It smells like dirty om, right in the middle of a lung!

The footsteps stopped nearby. About thirty hearts beat out rhythmic music of fear in the chests of the oms. — It must be rotten around here.

— Vermin! The city officials should clean all this up. Having a pet at home isn't a bad thing: it's entertaining. But all these wild pets, they raid, they're filthy, and they reproduce like crazy. Not to mention that these animals are miserable in the wild, full of lice and skin diseases!

— We'll take care of it.

— Not enough. A general de-somization would be necessary.

The two dragons resumed their march. A baby om chose this moment to cry. The footsteps stopped.

"There's a nest in the ditch," said a draag. "The noise was coming from that direction."

— Let's see.

A lamp lit up, flooding the ditch and blinding the oms. "Hey!" said a draag. "Come and see. A real colony!" "Let's take out a few of them before the rest escape. Jump in the ditch."

Two masses obscured the stars and tipped towards the oms, while Brave's voice cried out:

— Battle! Bite their legs, bite them everywhere! Battle!

Two dull thuds shook the ground, amid screams of terror.

— Trample all of this, said the voice of a draag.

- Battle !

The lamp's swift beam swept across the gray face of old Faithful, collapsed beside Terr. The teenager had time to see the old man's body: a bloody mess. The heavy voice of the draags fell from the heights:

— They bite! But… scoundrels!

— Stomp, stomp!

A limp pounding leveled the bottom of the ditch. In a dream of fear and action, Terr leaped out of the hole, met the hand of a draag leaning on the roadside. He bit down with all his might, felt himself swept up to the stars. A sharp jolt shook his jaws as he flew away, a shred of flesh between his teeth.

He rolled in the grass, suddenly wondering if he was dreaming while around him shouting figures rushed towards the scene of the battle.

— Jump on it, bite! Come on, you guys!

He recognized the hoarse voice of the Old Woman of the Bush and regained his courage. He ran, limping, towards the bloody ditch, lost himself in a tumult of violence, bit again at some enormous, throbbing thing collapsed across the embankment, while a race shook the road, further and further…

— Puncture their eardrums! Bite them! The other one runs away!

— Come on, OMs!

He sank his fangs against a soft surface, his ears filled with a buzzing of murderous madness. He finally felt silence settle in, a silence of a strange nature: one of victory and devastation.

— The draag is dead, said a voice.

— The other one ran away!

The people counted themselves, searching for each other in the night. Names were called out:

— Brave! Where is Brave?

He was found sunk in the mud, barely recognizable. A voice, that of the Old Woman, called for silence. All eyes turned towards the wiry, broken figure standing on the embankment.

"Oms of the Big Tree," she said, "without us, you'd all be dead. Brave is dead. We'll form the same gang, all together. But I don't know if you realize we killed a dragon. We have to get out of here fast!"

Babies were crying. A woman was moaning over a small corpse. "Silence, you women!" cried the Old Woman. "I lost my son in the process too. But what's done is done. Gather your dead and let's get out of here without delay, and at a trot!"

Shortly afterwards, she crossed the road, followed by a miserable band of cripples. They got lost in the night.

After walking about a hundred steps, Terr turned around. On the battlefield, he saw the head of the defeated draag thrown back, facing the stars. The two red eyes were gradually losing their natural luminescence.

Terr caught up with his family, his teeth chattering.

PART TWO

1.

The First Alderman of the northern continent of A stretched his membranes. He glanced at his axillary dial and sighed impatiently. Leaving his table, he paced back and forth in his study. He was waiting for someone.

A strange visit. What could Master Sinh want from him? He seemed to remember that the latter had invoked urgency to obtain this meeting.

He had barely paced the room twice when a voice came from the speaker, announcing the distinguished visitor.

"Bring them up!" the First Mayor ordered briefly. And he opened the door early to honor Master Sinh, the continent's great naturalist scholar.

When he appeared, the Aedile greeted him respectfully. — Blessings be upon you, Master. Enter my lodge and make yourself comfortable.

— Happiness upon you, First Mayor, I am happy to see you. After a few pleasantries, the two draags lay down facing each other on comfortable mattresses.

— You mentioned an emergency? the First said slowly, carefully hiding his nervousness.

"You old fool," he mused, "what complicated idea has sprouted in your brain?"

“Indeed,” the old man’s throat cracked. “I won’t beat around the bush. I demand immediate action against the Oms.”

— The Oms? the First one wondered.

— Yes. The situation is becoming worrying. Rest assured, I am not encroaching on your responsibilities. It would never have occurred to me to concern myself with the measures necessary for the hygiene of the continent.

But this goes beyond hygiene. The WHOs are a danger, a danger that is becoming more pronounced every day!

He pulled several papers from his tunic and asked:

— How many Oms do you think there are on Ygam?

Stunned, the Prime Minister made an evasive gesture.

"It's difficult for me to be precise," he admitted. "This year's census gives approximately ten million for the northern continent alone." He cut off the Master's interruption with his hand, adding, "Of course, we must add about one or two million wandering Oms. But certainly no more. Urban de-Osmization halts their invasion every two years."

— Without being very precise, declared the Master, the figures I have here far exceed those you have just stated, First Alderman.

With an apologetic gesture, he softened the harshness of his contradiction before continuing:

— The Faculty's estimates certainly come closer to the truth, no offense intended.

He made another reassuring gesture:

— The Continental Council is perfect, my dear Prime Minister, perfect in every respect. And the measures it takes are carried out with commendable regularity. But your staff have not been able, as we have, to study the matter as closely. Which is perfectly normal, by the way. To each their own.

He coughed a little, embarrassed by the bluntness of his frankness, and said: — I was talking about profession. Ours has led us to identify wandering radio operators using new methods, based on the number of leads and the frequency of raids.

The first one laughed.

"Pillage is a very strong word!" he protested. "A few petty thefts!"

— Don't laugh. The number of unprotected men is approaching thirty million on our continent. I contacted my colleagues on other continents. They used the same method. A simple addition gives us a total of one hundred and fifty million plus thirty-
Five million, as regularly declared by their masters. Therefore, there are nearly two hundred million oms on our planet. The two draags remained silent for a moment. The First spoke again after a moment.

"I confess you've got me confused. But since I wouldn't dream of doubting your learned pronouncements, we'll take action. Do you think ten desomations a year will be enough to stop the invasion? I can also tighten regulations on luxury breeding. What do you think?"

The old draag shook his head.

"Not enough," he said. "There isn't just the problem of the multiplication of oms, but another one, that of their evolution. And the second is more worrying than the first."

— Their… evolution? Explain yourself, Master.

The scientist sat up on his comfortable mattress and snapped his

membranes with determination.

"I'm going to have to give you a lecture," he apologized. "Oh! Don't worry, I won't go into details. You know that the Oms were acclimatized on Ygam by our ancestors of the Second Age?"

— Indeed, they brought them back from Earth.

— Their home planet! That's it… Well! Do you know what form of organization the Oms had back home? The first one was astonished.

"Organization, you say? But they're animals! They roamed in families, I suppose, or in wild herds!" "Not at all! They lived in vast clusters of cemented burrows, where everyone had their place. They formed societies of about a million individuals. A strict hierarchy maintained flawless, automatic discipline. The breeding females were pampered, their sole job being to give birth. At birth, each baby underwent a selection process that determined its destiny for reproduction, work, or combat. They had a rudimentary language."

— A language!

— Perfectly. Oh! Just a few words used for specific commands, always the same! The rigidity of their organization meant they didn't need to refine their means of expression. I'm thinking of an interesting example, an alarm call: ant!

— Ant? What is…

— A cry of alarm, I tell you. And it's interesting because it indicated the approach of their traditional enemy: a giant insect organized in a similar way and also living in rudimentary cities. But never mind… Have you heard of Spraw's theory?

— And again, non!

Spraw was a scholar of the last decade. He claimed that the Oms had once known a more brilliant civilization, similar to our own, but that its very perfection was the reason for a progressive sclerosis, a fixation on their way of life. Tightly imprisoned by their laws and regulations, the Oms had supposedly lost the need to think. Instinct had taken over from their intelligence. Why think when one leads a perfect life where everyone knows in advance what they must do? The Oms' intelligence had, how shall I put it, gradually atrophied, like a useless organ. There had been a slight decline in their standard of living, then a fixation. Thus, the progress of their civilization had supposedly ceased.

The First Mayor opened his mouth to say something, then stopped himself, simply gesturing for his guest to continue. "It was only a theory," said the Master. "For the past few days, we've known that Spraw was right. An archaeological mission has discovered an Oms city on Earth. Not some primitive burrowing settlement, do you understand? A city! And a thousand clues tell us that this city was

the work of civilized Oms! It was found miraculously beneath the coastal mud of an ocean. The results of the excavations amaze us a little more each day. It's a momentous event." The First Mayor rubbed his eardrums vigorously with his closed fists.

"I see where you're going with this," he guessed. "You're afraid the wandering Oms will rebuild their ancient civilization, with all the dangers that this possibility would create for our own. It seems to me…

"Excessive?" interrupted the scholar. "Listen carefully, my dear First. Everyone knows that humans are intelligent animals. What's serious is that they're becoming increasingly so. Some humans speak. Not just a few words! They form sentences! The learned human has become a frequent attraction in shows, to the point that the crowds have lost interest. It's an act with no originality whatsoever. Yet, last five years, when I was a child, this attraction didn't exist! I have here…"

He rummaged through his papers.

— I brought statistical records. In the town of Torm alone, it was reported to the police by property owners… He read:

— In the month of Leo (713): one hundred and three losses of men. In the month of the Bird: one hundred and forty-five losses. Month of Pisces: two hundred and ten. Then, month by month, we have successively: two hundred and twenty-seven, three hundred and two, seven hundred and twenty-one, a fantastic leap! To arrive at the last month with (get this) one thousand two hundred and thirty-six declarations of loss! We should say declarations of escape. In each case, the man in question proved particularly intelligent. In one out of three cases, voluntary escape is proven.

He spoke for a long time, gave more figures, relied on facts, and concluded:

— That's what we've brought about! We've... detribalized humanity, we've restored it to its individuality. It has certainly lost three-quarters of its tyrannical social instincts, but not its herd instinct. And it's also regaining its intelligence, its taste for freedom; perhaps tomorrow its taste for conquest. We've pulled it out of the impasse of instinct and set it back on the path of progress.

The First Mayor stood up.

"You have convinced me, Master Sinh," he said. "I will speak at the Grand Council. But rest assured," he added with a smile, "the conquest of the draags by the oms is not for tomorrow!"

— Don't laugh, Prime Minister, we don't know anything about it!

— We shouldn't exaggerate anything.

— Really? What about Klud's accident?

The First raised his arms to the ceiling:

— That's an old story! It hasn't even been proven that those two dragons were attacked by oms. Personally, I find it hard to believe!

The Master searched his tunic pocket:

"I have proof," he said. "Look what a colleague from the southern continent gave me."

He handed a fiximage to the First Alderman and commented: "The place was sparsely frequented. The bodies weren't found until six days later, and by then decomposition was advanced. It was impossible to salvage anything from the first body, the one in the ditch. But two stages away, the draag that had collapsed onto the road had suffered less damage. Look at that!"

- It is ?

— The right flank, at the level of the twenty-third rib. A nice bite mark, isn't it?

2.

On the coast of continent A, a small port long abandoned by the draags housed a strange city in its cellars.

Within a network of underground pipes and old sewers, a hidden city had established its streets, housing units, and public buildings. A city of Oms. Three million Oms!

A feverish activity reigned there. Small commando units constantly appeared at its gates, bringing back from the Draags a multitude of miscellaneous packages: tins of food, scrap metal, tools, training headphones. Everything was dumped haphazardly, and while each unit leader filed their report and noted their losses, other OMs sorted the loot, rolled the tins down the slopes of certain corridors, and carefully transported the headphones to the study centers.

In the center of the city, an old sewer had been partitioned into offices to house the official services. In one of these offices, a tall man with a blond beard sternly examined the charts adorning the walls. He pointed to one of them.

“Food stocks are still increasing,” he said. “Twenty thousand kilos! I’ve already made it clear that I intend to stop the arrivals. It’s a waste of time and energy. We have enough here to last a year after the exodus!”

"Don't get angry, Terr," said a middle-aged Black man sitting opposite him. "Your orders haven't had time to reach everywhere. Not all units are equipped with radio boxes."

— But I said…

— I know. Vaillant is doing what he can, but the factory in question is 150 stadia from here. To reach it, one must
We have to make progress on two open terrain stages, and since the region isn't served by any overhead cranes, we're having a lot of trouble getting the equipment. I've assigned half of the TV installers to workshops E, so they don't sit idle.

Terr wrote something in a notebook. Then he turned over several pages, frowning.

— Not too many losses yesterday?

— The average. Still no news on Operation Klud? — I hope they succeed! Without those parts, we'll never be able to leave. The three machines will be nothing but useless piles of scrap metal.

— Trust Vaillant. He's put his best players into it.

A lamp blinked on a cubic box. Terr pressed a button:

- Yes ?

— This is Vaill, said a voice.

Terr and Charbon smiled at each other.

— Well? said Terr.

— The parts are arriving, Terr. I'm touching one with my finger as I speak. The other two are on their way, somewhere near Path 4. We practically have them.

"Bravo," exclaimed Terr. "Quickly get the first one to the workshops!" "By the zipper, it will be there in a few minutes."

"Without damage, I hope."

“My guys are padding it. Don’t worry.” Terr gave Charbon a satisfied shove in the ribs. He put his notebook in his tunic pocket and said, “First tests in the tank in three days, old Charb! I have to go see that!”

Charb put his hand on his shoulder.

— Be careful, kid. You're overworking yourself. You barely sleep, you eat at lightning speed and…

— I've never felt so good.

At that moment, a commotion filtered in from the next room. Someone banged on the door.

- Yes !

A man with a wrinkled face appeared.

"Terr," he said, "the Old Woman is unwell. She is asking for you."

Terr and Charb exchanged a meaningful look. They left the room without a word and walked into a traffic corridor. Terr pressed the priority button and waited a minute, while red lights flickered on in the distance at every intersection. Then he straddled the seat of the trolley. Charb positioned himself behind him.

They drove up the slope, faster and faster. At the ninth millistade,

Terr braked and, locking the vehicle on the uphill rack, plunged into an adjacent corridor. After greeting several prominent figures in the city, he entered the Old Woman's house.

She was lying on a comfortable mattress. A blanket covered her legs. She made a faint gesture with her hand. "Leave me... alone with him," she whispered.

Charb put a finger to his lips and gently led the two doctors outside.

Terr knelt at the bedside of the old black woman. He took her hands and found them icy cold. A smell of pharmacy hung around her.

— Little one, she said, I won't see the Exodus.

"Don't talk," Terr whispered, "you're tiring yourself out."

She gave a small, broken laugh. A cough shook her pointed shoulders beneath her tunic. She pointed to a bottle on a table. Terr gave her a few drops and lifted her head slightly. She soon calmed down.

— Listen… I wanted to see you before… I left. Yes… yes! I'm not scared, you know! I wanted to tell you that… that I like you, kiddo. Don't make that face. Look, I'm just kidding… We're all leaving. One day, it'll be your turn, a long time from now, I hope.

She shook her head.

"That's not very clever of me, what I'm saying. I'm just a silly old woman. All of you, with... those Draag headphones, you're smarter than me. Even the little... the very little Oms who can read Draag lyrics now. That's thanks to you. You're kind of there when it comes to intelligence. But... in the beginning, when you were still..."

A little bit, everything we've done is thanks to me. Because I was... energetic, right?

Terr nodded her approval. She clenched her old, nervous fist on the blanket.

"Me, energy, you…" (she slowly tapped his forehead with her finger) "…head. So, I wanted to tell you… With your head, if I give you my energy, you'll succeed in the Exodus. You need both. I know you have energy, but I'm giving you mine too. In a little while, I won't be here anymore. You're going to be in charge of everything… In fact, you've already been in charge for days. The others listen to you, don't they?"

She gasped for a moment without saying anything, then her hands imprisoned Terr's, like talons.

"Can you feel it? Can you feel it, little one? My energy flowing from my arms? It goes into yours. I give it to you. It leaves me. Can you feel it? You…" His head pressed heavier on the fabric. His violet

lips remained fixed in a smile.

— Old woman? said Terr.

He gently removed his warm hands from the dead woman's cold fingers. He closed her eyes and remained bent over her for a moment. Then he walked slowly towards the door.

Everyone was standing in the next room. Terr signaled to them that it was over. Without looking behind him, he left, followed by Charb, whose thick lips were trembling with emotion.

In the main corridor, a crowd had gathered, alerted by vague rumors. They were all looking at Terr, who had appeared at the top of the stairs.

“The Old Woman is dead,” he announced in a toneless voice. Stupefaction froze the crowd. The Old Woman had always been the symbol of their unity, their hopes, their destiny. But when Terr made as if to step down, a voice from the West cried out: “Long live the Aedile!”

This triggered an explosion of cheers.

— Terr! Our Aedile! Long live the Aedile of the Oms! Long live the Exodus! At first, without success, Terr raised his hand to stem the tumult. A nervous tic made his chin tremble beneath his blond beard.

Someone came out of the Old Woman's residence and elbowed their way to stand close to the new mayor, presenting him with a television set. At the sight of the small device, the crowd gradually calmed down.

"Free men," said Terr, "the Old Woman died imploring me to succeed in the Exodus. For days and days, she fought for us. Then she fought against death."

More than to the crowd present, he felt his voice reaching thousands of radio amateurs hunched over their receivers throughout the city, and further afield, the sentries at the outposts lining the trails. Even further still, perhaps, his speech would awaken the energy of the raiding units operating in the Draag cities.

Somewhere near Klud, a Draag child was amusing himself by recording the static from a TV box. For fun, he played it back through a multigraph. He suddenly noticed that some of the noises sounded like speech. Draag words, as if spoken at breakneck speed and distorted by an animal's throat, rang in his ears.

Surprised and curious, the child dragged back the thread of the multigraph and replayed the strange sounds more slowly: "Free Oms," the device nasalized, "the Old Woman is dead..."

The rest was lost in a storm of crackling. At times, however,

isolated words could be picked up: "struggled... exodus... oms..." The child, Draag, stood up, delighted, his membranes snapping. "Father!" he cried. "There are oms speaking in the plurigraph!" "I forbade you to play with that device," said a voice from the next room.

The child draag went out. He could be heard insisting:

— I made an om voice with the plurigraph. It said: "om free, the old woman is dead…"

Taking advantage of his solitude, a wealthy man, who had been lying on a cushion, awoke from his feigned sleep, leaped onto the multigraph, and snatched the thread. In a second, hiding the broken thread in his fist, he resumed his lazy position and closed his eyes.

"What nonsense!" said Father Draag, entering the room. "It means nothing... Look, you've broken the thread. Play something else."
chose !

He took the device and pushed the child into the nature room. The little dragon dove into the pool and thought nothing more of it.

3.

Leaning over his TV box, Charb took some notes, said "thank you" and threw a piece of paper on Terr's table.

He read it quickly, frowning.

“We face this danger every day,” he finally said. “All clear communication must be strictly prohibited. Make sure the guys at Center 10 establish a code.”

— This will delay everything.

— I know. But imagine if our telecommunications had been intercepted by adult draags. They would have found us quickly. We would have failed very close to our goal.

He stood up and placed his hand on Charb's shoulder.

“We have one advantage over the Draags: speed. Our difference in scale has forced us to distort their language so they can’t keep up with our speech. Furthermore, we swallow most of their consonants. Without these small advantages, we would have lost the game long ago.”

Charb followed his idea.

— Establish a code, learn it. Meanwhile, shut down all telecommunications! The pace of our efforts will be paralyzed for at least three days!

— So be it. We can afford it. I was just talking about speed.

Consider that it takes a draag a quarter of a decade to reach adulthood. It only takes an om a year! He delved into personal memories and said:

— When I left the Draags, Tiwa, my little mistress, was a girl. She's still a girl today. She only has a rudimentary education. And I, I'm a blond-bearded om. I've had six children. I studied mathematics, I

I know ygamography inside and out, and I have enough knowledge to discuss anything with our technicians. I've developed provisional economy rules for the use of the oms, and I've laid the foundations for Economy 2, which will serve us on the wild continent where we intend to establish ourselves. Speed, always. We live at a different pace, and that's our main advantage.

He cast an affectionate glance at the graphics covering the walls and continued:

"In one year, we founded this city, organized intelligence networks, boosted the birth rate, trained specialists, and amassed fantastic equipment... Our progress is by leaps and bounds. During the same period, the Draags barely managed to pass this minor desomization law, which we outmaneuvered. The exodus will take place before this law is fully implemented. I repeat, we must lose these three days so as not to ruin everything. Besides, telecommunications will soon be reserved for spies only. Raids will no longer be necessary. We already have everything we need to carry out the Exodus and implement Economy 2. We will soon live withdrawn within this city. The telewires will suffice."

He pressed a button on the TV box and said:

— Workshops!

The device hummed for a moment, emitted a few clicks before letting out a voice.

— This is Central Ateliers; who is speaking?

— The Mayor. Where are you at with device 3?

— Don't hang up, Edile. I'm connecting you to room 3.

— This is the head of room 3!

— This is the Mayor. And this plaque?

— We're drilling the last hole, Edile. In an hour, all we'll have to do is climb onto the hull.

— Has your drill bit worn out?

— It will be fine. Changing it would take us longer.

— Okay. I'll go down and see.

Terr cut the silence and turned towards Charb.

— Do what's necessary, for the code!

Charb nodded, reaching for his telebox. Terr went outside,

jumped onto a cart, and slid down to the workshops. He crossed the mechanical warehouses, the small precision workshops, and arrived at the assembly halls. In the first two rooms stood the finished vessels: two enormous ships built with spare parts stolen from the Draag factories. Lines of Oms were loading the cargo needed for the Exodus.

From Room 3 filtered the modulated screech of metal biting metal, and the vast murmur of men panting with exertion. Terr entered. A square wound gaped open on the side of the third vessel, revealing glass organs and ganglia of multicolored wires. Further on, a curved plate was wedged to the floor by plastic cleats. Perched on scaffolding, a hundred men held an enormous crankshaft vertically, while another hundred workers endlessly rotated in the squirrel-head wheels that drove the drill bit. Sweat flowed by the liter along the struts, dripped onto the superheated plate, and boiled, dancing amidst the metal shavings. From hand to hand, cans of oil arrived continuously from the warehouses. A dozen Herculean men, their muscles varnished by the heat, emptied the lubricant beneath the drill bit.

Two females with their hair tied at the nape of their necks were doing a male's work. Terr approached them.

"What are they doing here?" he asked the head waiter who was hurrying to meet him.

"They are sterile," replied the man. "They asked to serve in another way."

Terr stepped aside as a drum, rolled by strong arms, passed by. Walking towards the ship, he climbed the ladder leading to the hatch. Still followed by the engineer, he entered the belly of the craft via a ramp. As he did so, his fingers lovingly caressed the smooth surfaces of the bulkheads.

His steps led him to the chart room, behind the cockpit. As he entered, a small group of students stood up. — Long live the Aedile!

"That's fine," said Terr. "Sit down and continue your work."

He leaned over a map, asked a few specific questions, received the answers in a flurry of activity, and turned a smile towards the instructing officer.

“My word,” he said, “these young men know more than I do!” The officer made a gesture that was half understanding, half respectful, meaning: everyone has their job, yours is to command. At that moment, the lights clicked three times and went out. “A breakdown!” someone said.

But the lamps flashed three more times before letting night settle in for good.

"An alert!" said Terr. "Not a move! Who can pass me a flashlight?"

A cold object was slipped into his hand. He pressed the button and swept the room with a luminous brush.

"Follow the instructions," he said briefly to his motionless companions. "Squad leader, guide me out of the workshops." In room 3, work had ceased. Perched on their beams or scattered wherever the alert had caught them, the oms remained motionless in a stifling atmosphere of sweat and burning metal.

Terr quickly crossed the construction site, left the foreman, and ran down the corridors leading to the Central Monitoring Station. He passed silent shadows along the way. At the entrance to the Center, someone stopped him.

— Edile! said Terr, lighting up his face.

The sentry let him in. Terr rushed up the stairs leading to the main lookout. This was the name given to certain strategically placed points atop the ruins of the draag city.

Muffling the sound of his footsteps, he entered the cabin, switching off his lamp. Vaill and Charb were already inside with a few watchmen. Vaill pointed to the sandy expanse, dotted with sparse tufts of grass. Half a stadium from the city, a sphere had landed. One, two... five gigantic draags were wandering around.

The tallest one had perched himself on a dune and was gazing at the ocean. Another, sprawled in the sand, was blissfully nibbling at the contents
from a tin can. The last three were leaning over the engine of the open-topped sphere. From the lookout, the heavy murmur of their conversation could be heard.

"They're broken down," Charb sighed.

Terr slowly shook his head:

"I don't like it," he said.

Seeking an explanation, his companions cast astonished glances at him. But he remained silent, attentive to the slightest gestures of the giant amphibians.

After many long hours, the draags climbed back into their craft, which took off immediately. In a few seconds, the sphere disappeared over the horizon.

— All clear! ordered Terr.

And while a man was transmitting his order by telebox, he looked at his friends with a grave expression.

"No sphere ever passes this way," he said. "These draags came for a specific purpose. Their breakdown was a charade." Vaill protested:

— How can you be so certain?

Terr continued without directly answering:

— Have you ever seen a draag eat lying on its side? Have you ever seen one take an hour to empty a can of food? That one was putting on an act! He was staring at the ruins!

Charb jumped.

— Are you sure?

“As sure as it is,” said Terr, “the other guy was pushing something or other into the sand with a nonchalant air. He’s surrounded the town with detectors or something like that, all while pretending to be strolling. Follow me into the dunes, we’ll take a closer look.”

They climbed down from the watchtower and ran to the spot where the draag had begun its work. It didn't take them long to pull a round object topped with a metal antenna out of the sand. "What is it?" asked Vaillant.

"I'd like to know," said Terr. "Have me carefully carry this to the laboratories."

He looked at his friends and added:

— Oms! Time is running out. We will carry out the Exodus tonight. The draags are too slow to make a decision before then.

— But the third device isn't ready!

— It will be. We're going to triple the pace. We'll launch it without trials. There's no more question of a dress rehearsal. Charb! Make the necessary arrangements with the foremen. I want the third ship loaded right now, without waiting for it to be finished. If there's a delay, we'll tow it with the other two.

“How come we weren’t warned by the networks?” “The high-class fake oms can’t just slip in everywhere. Besides, the Grand Council isn’t held on this continent!” “The raiding units won’t have time to get back.” “I know. I’m suffering more than you can imagine. But we can’t sacrifice the Exodus for a few om lives. We’ll take a risk, though. Vaill, get as many people back as possible by telebox. I hope your calls don’t get picked up. Tell those who are too far away to stop all regular activity and take refuge wherever they can.”

As he walked back towards the ruins, Terr frowned. "Let's hope they haven't spotted the three ships," he said. "Do we have any thin sheet metal?"

"I'll ask the reserves," said Charb. "But I imagine there are still some megaweights left. Why?"

The mayor made a vague gesture.

— I'm planning a little trick to deceive the draags.

4.

A bell vibrated on the table of the First Alderman A south. He pressed a button and said "Yes?".

— Operation “Old Port” is over, Mayor,” said a voice. “The still images are in the lab.”

The mayor shuddered.

"Bring them in as they come out," he ordered. He touched another contact and said:

— Master Sinh is due to arrive at the intercontinental sphere in a few minutes. Do everything you can to get him to my place as soon as possible.

Soon, the first fixed-image proofs fell into the drawer reserved for urgent documents. The Mayor took them and spread them out on his table. He scrutinized the enlarged views of the abandoned city. From time to time, he chuckled. Faint clues revealed to him a high concentration of oms in these ruins. He outlined an old gutter riddled with bare footprints in red, did the same around three small silhouettes against the light in the crack of an old wall, and noted the unusual presence of a stack of new boxes, poorly hidden by a curtain of grass.

He was informed of Master Sinh's arrival. They didn't waste time on empty pleasantries. The mayor pointed out the images to the old scholar. The latter quickly scanned them and said:

— This isn't very interesting. We already knew there were oms in this city. You only worked on the surface? — No, Master, said the Alderman.

He leaned over the drawer and took out more prints. — Here are some transfiximages.

— How deep?

“See, it’s written in the corner of the sheet: 50 millistades.” Master Sinh gave a satisfied “ah.” He inclined his wrinkled head toward the table. Soon, his nervous finger rested at the top of the image. “See!” he said simply.

The image was clear. The rays had pierced the foreground without fixing them onto the film. A superficial cross-section of the ruins closest to the camera was visible.

— Some oms! said the Aedile.

"Of course, oms!" echoed the old man. "That's what interests me! Those black objects around which they gather in groups of three!"

- Of the…

"Pocket weapons, ray guns! These guys are armed, my dear

Prime Minister! Do you realize that? Of course, given their small size, they need three crewmen per weapon, whereas we only have to pull the trigger with one finger. Look at this, they've modified these weapons for their use. Each ray gun is mounted on a spring-loaded carriage. They've welded a lever to each firing button."

He quickly scanned several photos, pointing out strategically placed batteries here and there:

— Look! There and there… Here! Three more! On their scale, that's a veritable artillery! Do you realize that at the slightest offensive move, your draags were killed practically at point-blank range? — It's terrifying!

The Master nodded thoughtfully, his large head wrinkled with age. "Let's see the rest," he said, seizing the proofs that were piling up in the drawer. "Here, we have... four centistades deep... let's see... oh! there! Look at this, First. These corridors, these staircases, these... what is this?"

— Lamps, I think!

— But yes, networks of lamps to light up this… labyrinth! They're not saving any money. They must have loads of batteries… And here?

He moved on to other images. Ten centistades, thirty, forty. The prints became increasingly blurry with depth.
Each "cut" was surrounded, in a little way, by the parasitic projection of the previous shots.

Nevertheless, the two draags recognized warehouses of weapons, food, tools; dormitories, nurseries; instruction rooms crammed with headphones on which groups of ten students leaned.

"That's the most dangerous part," said Master Sinh. "The rest would be nothing. These eavesdroppers are divulging our techniques to them, and a whole science that we've spent ages perfecting."

“Your last sentence is reassuring,” argued the First. “If it took us ages…”

“No, you’re completely wrong,” the Master interrupted. “Just think, we’ve let ourselves be robbed of a fully developed science! They only have to take what we’ve painstakingly built. Look where they are after just a few months! Woe betide us if we don’t intervene. They’ll surpass us! They have prodigious capacities for assimilation. Besides, all this only half surprises me. When I learned they were communicating via cable networks, I concluded they were capable of manufacturing easily transportable teleboxes. If they can do that, they can do everything else… Let’s look at the last images.”

The last pages were practically indecipherable. The overlapping of the various plans obscured any reasonable interpretation.

"I'll have this analyzed by the laboratory," said the Mayor. No sooner said than done, he threw the images into a drawer and dictated his orders over the radio.

"When will they be finished?" inquired the Master.

— Not before tomorrow, unfortunately.

The scientist sighed and his old, dried-out membranes cracked.

"I have taken other measures," said the Mayor. "I told you about them." "Yes, I know. A dam!"

— The city is practically surrounded. If they have motor vehicles or bubbles, it will be impossible for them to use them.

The old man made a discouraged gesture towards the fiximages scattered on the table.

“After seeing all this,” he said, “I wonder if they haven’t spotted your agents’ scheme. They’re capable of having unearthed your materials and altered their wavelength for their own purposes.”

— Still! My draags acted discreetly! — Discreetly on our scale. But an imperceptible gesture can appear as a huge blunder to a slightly observant little om. I think we'll have to consider more brutal, more decisive measures.

— To crush everything without warning?

— Perhaps. I don't think they can fight us on equal terms. Not yet. But we've only located one city. What if there are others?

Annoyance slightly clouded the red eyes of the Mayor. — I would be surprised. The few telegrams we've received…

"Those few telemessages!" the Master said bitterly. "That proves you haven't intercepted them all. Imagine if they had a code. Imagine if a dozen similar cities were operating in secret on each of the four continents!"

— Nothing allows us to formulate such suppositions. The authorities of other continents have detected nothing more disturbing in their own countries than the disorderly activities of wandering Oms. De-Somization…

— I wonder if desomization doesn't promote the evolution of the oms by giving them the need for a defensive organization! The First Aedile raised his arms in the air, membranes stretched: — But it was you yourself, Master, who first advised this preventive measure to my colleague from North!

— I may have made a mistake, I am not infallible. I was still unaware of the extent of the danger… Believe me, the time has come to ask ourselves if the draags are still the dominant race of Ygam.

"You're pushing things to the extreme," said the Mayor, making a rattling sound that resembled laughter.

“Oh! Don’t laugh,” protested the master. “I’ve been studying the

Oms for a long time. I've long marveled at the abilities of this… animal. The danger is terrible. There's a Council meeting in eight days. Know that I intend to propose immediate and total de-Somization there."

— But you can't be serious! The public hasn't been informed of our problems. You're going to cause a huge uproar. Many people are very attached to their local media!

— When they find out…

"No, Master Sinh. There's another reason against this project. If you proclaim the truth everywhere, the organized Oms will find out. They'll react and find something to destroy our action or, at the very least, weaken its impact. We must take them by surprise!"

The Master remained thoughtful for a moment.

"Perhaps you're right," he said finally. "We could fabricate an epidemic and make vaccination mandatory for the OMs against a phantom disease. Under the cover of this lie, we could, not kill the OMs, but destroy certain brain centers to deprive them of all intelligence. What do you think?"

— That seems like a clever move. I'll have the matter studied… Goodness be to you, Master Sinh, you've still managed to frighten me! Starting tomorrow, I will convene a small council on a continental scale to consider a large-scale action.

The Master stood up.

— Happiness, Mayor. Hurry if you believe me! He looked

at his axillary dial.

"I'll be in Torm in an hour," he said. "I'll speak to your colleague in North. But it's already late. Please be so kind as to let him know I'm coming."

5.

Beneath a topaz sky darkened by the setting sun, a vast sea of fresh blood swayed gently from one horizon to the other. Currents teeming with plankton traced their arabesques with the whims of the breezes.

Lost points in the immense poem, three ships carved their course, obstinately. They carved through an ocean of colors, insensitive to the nonchalant graces, the languid enchantments of the waves that glittered with a thousand facets as they strutted in their splendor.

Heading east, they carried within them all the hope of a race breaking free from its chains. They sailed in a triangle, the first two

towing the other, whose hull teemed with roped-together men.

Whipped by sea spray, sweat washed by the sea's crimson froth, the crewmen, in clusters, pressed their full weight against the gleaming back of the last ship. Muscles knotted with exertion, flesh clamped tightly onto iron, they held the giant nuts firmly against the lips of the last plate. The ship was being finished mid-voyage.

The crew had forgotten all personal worries. Individual suffering no longer mattered. They were but a single soul straining toward a single goal. Sometimes, stunned by the splendid slap of a wave, some lost consciousness and lay like dead weight among the others, who barely noticed. Unbalanced, others hung strangled from their ropes, like trinkets clinging to the rounded side of the hull. The vagaries of the rolling finished them off with intermittent drenchings. The ship dragged in its wake some twenty inert puppets gliding on the muscular back of the ocean.

Inside, in symmetrical labor, others suffocated under the sheet metal, in the animal smell of exertion mixed with that of heated metal. Square backs bled, braced for hours under the supports of a screwdriver, operated on the rotating stand by dozens of arms.

Regularly, water seeped in like powder through the cracks, harshly drenching the wounds and the sweat of exertion. Other workers pumped ceaselessly, throwing back into the sea the brine of oxides and urea that tossed them around up to their mid-calves. All this in a twilight of fumes and sticky, false daylight, amidst a vast murmur of curses and groans, supporting the modulated screech of the screw thread grinding to death; a demented symphony punctuated by the cymbal crashes of the sea.

When everything was over, night had long since drowned out the splendors of the sunset.

Exhausted, the outside teams went back through the hatch one by one. The pumpers were relieved while the technicians began installing the last reactor. The hardest part was over.

The site manager informed the master, who immediately relayed the good news to Terr. The communication was made via the telegraph cable strung between the two ships.

"Perfect," said Terr. "How long will it take to finish?"

The third captain hesitated:

"It's hard to say exactly, Édile. Between ten and fifteen o'clock, according to the foreman. Not to mention the difficulties caused by the swell, drying the reels will take time. If I had to do it again…"

“Yes, I know,” said Terr. “We wouldn’t have mounted the reels before leaving. The drying time will be longer than the time saved by

mounting them. Any improvised action inevitably involves mistakes. But let’s not dwell on the past.”

Terr turned to the master 1 standing beside him. —

How much, for the Siwo?

— Twelve hours, without pushing the pace.

“Did you hear your colleague from ship 1?” said Terr, leaning over the radio. “In twelve hours, we’ll reach the Siwo Current. Everything needs to be finished by then.” Master 3’s voice hesitated again:

"I don't think it's wise to count on it, Edile." "Do your best. Let me know in ten hours how the work is progressing. If you're behind schedule, we'll slow down." "Understood."

Terr cut in and paced back and forth in the cabin. “We’ll save a lot of time by taking advantage of the Siwo’s speed,” he said. “This detour shortens our journey. But there’s no question of continuing the tow at this speed. What gap do you foresee between each ship?”

— Prudence dictates a minimum of half a stadium. But I just spoke to the engineers about it. They're worried the ships won't withstand speeds exceeding 100 stadia per hour. — What is the speed of the Siwo?

— At this latitude: thirty stades. But the speed doubles at the confluence of the South Siwo. And the southern current is dotted with egg-islands. The shells will suffer. We'll have to reduce our own speed to fifteen stades. Fifteen plus sixty, we'll still be sailing at seventy-five. But our speed will remain fifteen relative to the eggs. We'll break them as we pass. By going faster, we'll end up breaking ourselves.

Terr frowned.

— And the prongs? he said.

The captain made a reassuring gesture.

— According to the specialized listening devices, the eggs won't hatch in this location, especially at this time of year. Incubation isn't complete. He showed a map, touched a point in the middle of the red-tinted seas:

— That's where the hatching begins, very close to the equator. Our route doesn't pass through there.

— Induced hatches?

— It's rarely dangerous. Certainly, the prongs are alive in the egg. But breaking the egg kills them at the same time.

— I've heard about survival.

— It's very brief. They're quickly drowned. Perhaps we should talk to Sav about it, if you like, Edile.

Terr placed his hand on the TV box, hesitated, and said:

— I'll go find him myself.

The captain saluted and climbed the ladder to the bridge. Terr went out into the corridor. He went down to the lower deck, crossed the side holds where crewmen were checking the cargo moorings, and reached the port passageway. A hundred paces or so took him to the cabins. He entered, greeted warmly by everyone.

"Where is Sav?" he asked.

— Third box, someone said.

He made his way through the crowd, offering words of friendship or encouragement here and there, cordially patting the shoulder of a woman writhing in nausea. In the third box, he found Sav sitting in a corner, sprawled among maps of the wild continent.

The naturalist raised a greying head from his papers. —

Well, the Alderman! Do you need me?

Terr led him away.

"In private, you don't have to give me the Edile," said Terr. "I came to talk to you about prongs."

- Yes ?

— Is it dangerous?

— Everything that is most dangerous!

Terr shook his head:

— No, I mean: to the deliberate explosion?

Sav se pinça le nez.

"It depends," he said. "Generally, they're too weak. Not as weak as a premature baby, though. Given their weight, they can make a move with serious consequences."

He winked as he commented:

— I know how to choose my expressions, you know!

— You are very witty!

— Thank you. As I was saying: according to the earphones we have, the newborn pronge can make an unfortunate gesture in its death throes. Last month, the looting units brought back an old earphone in which I found some details on this. Nine times out of ten, there is no danger.

"That's fun!" said Terr. "Since we're going to meet thousands of them, we'll only have hundreds of setbacks. Don't you have anything reassuring to say?"

— Yes. They're too young to swim, and they scream really loudly before they sink. Apparently, you shouldn't be scared. The louder they scream, the faster they sink. They're emptying the air from their lungs, you understand? But when they scream, they really scream! It drowns out the sound of the sea. I can't wait to see it!

"I certainly hope we don't get too close to it. Haven't you heard of any way to render them completely harmless?" Sav nodded.

— Yes. Go as fast as possible. That's what the draags did when they sailed on small vessels.

Terr sighed.

— Unfortunately, we won't be able to do the same; the shells wouldn't hold up. But… what did you just say? The draags themselves were afraid of the baby-prongs?

"Of course! It dates back to the old days of navigation. In those days, it wasn't uncommon to see a pronge wrap its tentacles around the propeller as it passed. Before dying, it could easily demolish the vessel. And even if the ship survived, with its propeller damaged, it risked spinning for months in the Siwo before crashing onto the reefs of Ambala, at the terminus. Ray weapons didn't exist yet; bullets ricocheted off the pronges and didn't finish them off quickly enough to prevent an accident. But as I already told you, those things were rare. The draags would push the ship forward and burst all the eggs as they passed, before the pronges had time to cause any damage."

Terr grabbed Sav by the sleeve.

— And you're telling me all this now?

"You didn't ask me anything!" protested the naturalist. "You had Charb tell me to dedicate myself to the study of the fauna and flora of the wild continent! I assumed you knew all this and that you had taken precautions."

Terr let go of him and shook his head:

"You're right," he said, "it's my fault. I didn't imagine... it's my fault."

— We have weapons! suggested Sav.

— It's impossible to use them. They would have to be mounted on the hull and… it's too late.

— Avoid the Siwo.

— That's impossible too. The trip is scheduled for a specific time. We can't do without the Siwo without losing two days. And the reactors need to be overhauled every ten thousand stadia.

— So, I only see one solution: travel by diving. — We'll never last that long underwater. — I mean: dive as often as possible.

"And waste time," Terr murmured slowly. "I'll talk to the captains. We'll see what happens."

He pretended to walk away, then turned around.

— How much does a newborn pronge weigh?

— From ten to fifteen thousand pounds.

"As much as all three ships combined," sighed Terr. "Thank you, Sav." At that moment, all the ship's bells started ringing. Terr jumped up, crossed the three cabins, and rushed to the passageway radio.

"This is the Aedile!" he yelled. "What's going on, Master?"
"Bubble draag to the south!" announced the officer. "We're diving, all lights off. I don't think she's spotted us." "The others?"

— It's okay! Building three is following us. The cables are holding. We're reducing to five stages.

Twenty long hours later, a dirty dawn rose over the sea. A wine-red sea crossed from west to east by a golden-brown current: the Siwo.

The three ships sailed in formation, half a stadium apart. Around them, flying fish leaped, their crests golden and their hollows violet. They glittered on the sea like sequins on the folds of a cloak. Sometimes,
Some fell back onto the black deck of a ship and hopped about in disarray before being thrown back by the next roll. After another hour, the first pronge egg appeared, like a round, greenish hill bobbing with the waves. It was easy to avoid. It swirled for a long time in the eddies created by the passing ships, then disappeared in the distance.

But already, two more giant spheres were visible on the horizon. Traveling at thirty stades, they were easily overtaken. Ship 1 had to tack slightly to pass between them.

Then came groups of five, seven, fifteen eggs at a time, which had to be navigated around. Time was lost. When the sea was covered with them, Terr, with a heavy heart, ordered them to pick up the pace and go straight ahead.

Excited, Sav had asked permission to go up onto the bridge. Five crewmen were already there: the captain, the master and the petty officer, the helmsman, and, sitting in a corner, the radio operator. The three ships being separated, wireless communications between them had to be re-established; a code was being used.

The naturalist positioned himself so as not to disturb anyone and, with his hands clasped on the railing, opened his eyes wide.

The first egg wasn't rammed. It rolled along the hull with a thunderous crash. The second was struck head-on and exploded on the bow, in a gush of greenish fluid that stained the bridge window. The crew felt as if they were walking through a jar of marmalade.

Dipping its nose into a trough, the ship seemed to shake itself, washing off the viscous trails spread across the deck, and attacked another egg. With a terrible crack, this one emptied its cream into the waves. Soft debris was swept away on either side, pell-mell with embryonic organs, orange in color.

Sav looked at the Mayor and smiled.

"So far, so good," he said. "These eggs are still young. In an hour or two, we might get our hands on some slightly more robust little pronges."

Terr said curtly:

— It seems like you're happy about that, Sav!

The naturalist retreated behind a sheepish expression:

"Oh no!" he said awkwardly.

But the gleam in his eyes belied his words.

The deck seeped with spilled acid, quickly washed away by the waves. From time to time, the two other ships could be seen, to the right and left. They were cheerfully smashing through the buoys blocking their path. The radio only recorded good news from them. It all seemed easy and harmless. At first, the crewmen took a vulgar, sporting pleasure in smashing through the obstacles. Then, accustomed to the din, reassured by the relative sturdiness of the hull, they eventually found this strange voyage monotonous.

The explosions continued. They even seemed to be getting more and more successful. Some eggs leaped like bombs, with a deafening roar like artillery. A few appeared to deflate like balloons. Others sent shards of their shells flying, sometimes ricocheting off the backs of the waves.

"Gas!" said Sav. "It must stink outside!"

Terr looked at him:

— What, gas?

“Yes,” the naturalist explained. “These eggs are full of gas due to the attack of acids on the inside of the shell. They are closer to natural hatching. Look!”

He pointed his finger towards the bridge. A torn bundle of greenish convolutions throbed spasms before being swept away.
"That was a heart," said Sav, "a heart already formed! Each pronge has five of them."

— Five hearts?

— Yes. And two livers, like the draags.

A gigantic egg appeared to arrive like lightning on the ship. Lifted by a wave as the building nosedived, it crashed onto the bridge hatch, disgorging a pool of murky liquid that obliterated all visibility.

The captain ordered a dive to get rid of the filth that was smearing the windows.

Upon surfacing, the ship struck another sphere. Shreds of membranes floated like wet rags at the corners of the hatch. And they were able to sail freely into open water, towards another school of eggs appearing in the distance.

The radio operator handed the master a paper which he read to

the Aedile: vessel 3 was reporting a minor malfunction. Unbalanced by the impacts, two heavy induction coils had broken their fasteners and, in their fall, tore away part of the installation.

"Ask how long it will take them to fix this," Terr ordered.

The response was immediate:

— Thirty minutes!

Terr looked at the horizon studded with rounded hills. He raised an eyebrow towards the midships.

"We'll be there in twenty minutes," the officer estimated.

"Engines out!" ordered the Mayor. "Give the same orders to the other two ships."

Far to the left, a little further back, we saw a few eggs explode. Ships 2 and 3 soon appeared and approached the aedile's ship. It was still speeding along. A giant egg spun like a top in its wake. Its polished shell, soaked with sea spray, caught the reflections of the turbulent sky.

As it passed building 2, the egg tipped over in a backwash and headed straight for building 3. Building 3 made no attempt to avoid it. A cracked sound was heard, slapping against the expanse, and the oms saw their first living pronge!

The sheer scale of the spectacle slowed its phases. As if in a dream, a long crack wound its way around the shell. The boat vanished beneath a torrent of foul humors. Like a jack-in-the-box, a greenish creature appeared to rise from the lower portion of the egg, forming a cradle. The pronge seemed to stand upon the sea, with the half-closed eyes of a newborn. Its enormous, wrinkled face was adorned with tufts of tentacles at the corners of its lips. The comical sight of this mustachioed infant, balanced on the side of a wave, was swept away by its cry.

The soft mouth opened like a funnel and bellowed towards the clouds. The vibrant, monstrous sound cracked across the sea like a whip on a drum. The smooth water rippled with small waves for a stadium's worth of space, and the ocean seemed to have goosebumps.

The pronge clumsily unfurled a fin, its roar continuing unabated. It spun, lost its balance, and crashed down like a slap in the face. When the spray subsided, the head with its squinting eyes could still be seen floating. But heavy water was already rushing into its open mouth, drowning out a gurgling sound of agony. The fin was seen flailing, swinging in a semicircle over the receding ship, number 3. The ship seemed to rear up, looped just above a wave, and disappeared. Forever.

Pale, after an hour of fruitless dives, the Aedile ordered the search to be abandoned.

"Farewell, brave companions," he said. "As for us... it's impossible! We won't get through. Let's drift with the Siwo to save the reactors. Let's lose two days. Is that what you think, Sav?"

"You're right," he said. "The first pronge costs us a ship. And we still have thousands of eggs to encounter. Let's sail at their speed, but above all, let's not break them... We'd all perish!"

With drawn features, he glanced at the sea. They were drifting amidst green domes, which clinked softly, with small impacts, between each other and against the hulls of the ships.

6.

Those were two long days of anguish, spent in constant fear of breaking an egg. At times, gusts of warm wind hastened the dance, and the shells struck the ships more violently. Everyone would then grit their teeth, waiting for a crash that might have unleashed twenty prongs at once.

In fact, another premature pronge was seen hatching just a few cables away. Two eggs split open against each other. The first vomited only harmless magma, but the other opened onto a trumpeting monster that sank straight down, mouth open, as if it had vowed to bellow until the end of time.

At the end of the second day, the Siwo gradually veered towards the equator, towards the Bay of Prenges, where the young were born, mated and frolicked for many months before taking their annual flight towards the poles. At the poles, they laid their eggs in the current's waters and the cycle began again.

Terr decided to leave the Siwo. And as it would have been a shame to have an accident at the last moment, the two ships traveled submerged for the ten stades that freed them from the marine river.

The following night was calm. But the rising sun revealed purple waters. We were approaching the Foam Pot, where the ocean, worked by contrary winds, foamed incredibly.

Little by little, as the hours passed, the ships cut through a creamy sea. The riverboat went ahead. Its bow frayed as it passed clumps of whitish foam, then veritable bales of cotton floating on the surface, then mountains of froth resembling icebergs from a distance.

Soon, the water became invisible; the sky too. We had to advance blindly through a giant, soapy wash, in an iridescent world, crisscrossed by magical, multicolored reflections. A thousand transparent spheres amalgamated around the ships, above, everywhere, foaming and billowing, sparkling with a thousand different lights.

They spent a long time in the play of a light that infinitely varied its spectra and rays, its images and mirages, its refractions and fringes, in an unreal chromatism, in a geometry where the eye got lost in multiconcave perspectives.

And far above them, invisible, the sky played with its golden clouds, projecting its fantasies into the moss like the craftsman of a giant kaleidoscope.

Their eyes burning with wonder, they only emerged at nightfall from this palace of mirages floating on the sea. And there, suddenly appearing around a hill of foam, another mirage awaited them.

Far on the horizon, and yet so real that one wanted to reach out, its mountains silhouetted against the light above a calm and shining sea, the Savage Continent seemed to float above the waters, like an aerial island.

Terr opened the hood. A waft of scents filled the gangway, as if sent from the earth to welcome the crew. Dead calm in the bay. High above, a few birds circled and croaked in the warm air.

The hatches were opened. A crowd of emigrants filled the decks. Terr uttered a felicitous remark, poetically in keeping with the setting. He gestured with his hand.

"Oh dear," he said. "Destiny is offering us the Savage Continent like a cake on a silver platter!"

He turned to Sav and added:

— We haven't even forgotten the garnish.

He was referring to islands of strange flowers and fruits that floated here and there, gently rocked, their edges licked by small warm ripples.

Sav seemed to emerge from a dream. He looked at the fruits and flowers that the prow was slowly jostling as it passed.